



Congress of the United States House of Representatives

August 21, 2019

PLEASE RESPOND TO:

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The Honorable Brenda L. Roberts
Deputy Associate Director, Pay & Leave
U.S. Office of Personnel Management
1900 E Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20415

Dear Associate Director Roberts:

I write to express my serious concerns with the Roseburg VA Health Care System's (RVAHCS) persistent recruitment and retention issues and urge the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to do everything in its power to help alleviate these concerns.

As you may recall, I wrote to Federal Salary Council (FSC) Chairman Sanders detailing my concerns with locality pay rates for Southwest Oregon earlier this year. In your April 4 response letter, you noted that "Federal agencies have considerable discretionary authority to provide pay and leave flexibilities to address significant recruitment and retention problems."

On June 24, I sent a letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Robert Wilkie urging the VA to use these pay flexibilities to address recruitment and retention issues. In a July 23 response letter, Secretary Wilkie detailed a number of pay flexibilities already being utilized to attract and retain qualified candidates, including recruitment and relocation incentives, retention incentives, student loan repayment program benefits, education debt reduction program access, appointments above the minimum rate of the Grade, and Special Salary Rates.

Despite the use of these flexibilities, Secretary Wilkie wrote that "RVAHCS facilities in Lane and Douglas counties continue to be difficult labor markets for our health care organizations to recruit and retain qualified staff." Most recently, staff shortages within RVAHCS forced the abrupt closure of the Roseburg Emergency Department (ED) and conversion to an Urgent Care (UC) facility.

According to RVAHCS, "shortfalls in qualified providers to staff Emergency Department ancillary services, such as laboratory services, radiology services and respiratory services" forced the VA to abruptly change its plan and close the ED much sooner than had been planned. Moving forward, the UC will only operate Monday through Friday as staffing shortages prevent the UC from operating seven days a week. Meanwhile, Roseburg, Oregon, veterans currently have no community care UC facility in Roseburg, and they are understandably concerned about accessing immediate medical care after 8pm and on weekends.

Without appropriate OPM intervention, I am concerned that RVAHCS will continue to suffer from recruitment and retention issues, which will ultimately lead to degraded care for veterans. Neglecting or abandoning Southwest Oregon's veterans is not an option.

Instead, I request that OPM work closely with the VA to help alleviate these concerns as soon as possible.

In the short term, I request that OPM expedite review of any and all Special Salary Rate requests. In his July 23 letter, Secretary Wilkie detailed that there is currently a "Special Salary Rate table pending approval, with more occupational series under consideration." I also ask that OPM work with the VA to consistently ensure that all possible pay flexibilities are being leveraged to their fullest extent for RVAHCS.

In the long term, it is important that OPM work with the FSC to ensure proper consideration is given to either recommending inclusion of Douglas and Lane Counties within the Portland-Vancouver-Salem, OR-WA locality pay area or recommending the establishment of a unique locality pay designation area for Douglas and Lane Counties.

Multiple candidates declined RVAHCS employment offers between 2017 and 2019 because the salary and benefit packages did not cover the higher cost of living and housing shortages in Douglas and Lane Counties. These counties are currently part of the Rest of the U.S. locality pay, which means employees are only paid 15.67 percent more than the General Schedule (GS) Base Pay. Meanwhile, GS employees in the Portland-Vancouver-Salem, OR-WA locality pay area are paid significantly more at 23.13 percent. Thorough reevaluation and increases for Douglas and Lane Counties would go a long way towards addressing recruitment and retention issues that have consistently plagued RVAHCS.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this issue, and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Peter A. DeFazio
Member of Congress

CC: Michael Murphy
Network Director, VISN 20

Keith Allen
Director, RVAHCS